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ABSTRACT

Highlighting significant findings and discussing the debate between merit promotion and social promotion, this executive summary presents the main findings and concepts detailed in a larger report on student promotion standards in American education. It outlines the movement toward developing higher promotion standards and summarizes studies of the five school systems evaluated for the report. It concludes by stating that, in the absence of evidence showing one form of promotional policy to be most effective, the choice of merit promotion or social promotion must be made on the basis of social values. (MD)

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The Characteristics & Consequences Of Alternative Student Promotional Policies

by
David F. Labaree

EA 016 328

Executive Summary

Prepared for the
Promotion Standards Committee of
Citizens Committee on
Public Education in Philadelphia

SETTING THE STANDARD:

The Characteristics & Consequences

Of Alternative Student Promotional Policies

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Executive Summary

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FOREWORD

In June 1982 the Board of Directors of Citizens Committee on Public Education in Philadelphia (CCPEP) met to formulate its program agenda for 1982-83. One of the four areas chosen for in-depth examination was Promotion Standards, with the stated purpose of reviewing and supporting the planning and implementation of a promotion policy in the school system, starting with a review of an initial planning and pilot test of promotion policy in District 6 (Northwest Philadelphia).

We began with a visit to New York City to observe and discuss the Promotion Gates Program and followed up by scheduling visits to four Philadelphia public schools outside of District 6 with recently instituted school wide standards for promotion. These visits alternated with discussions with District 6 officials about the preliminary design of that program in which we spurred the planning of a summer school program for students in grades two, five and eight who would be likely to be retained in grade because their academic performance on criterion reference tests was more than two years below grade level.

After only a few months of exploration, it became clear to us that we needed a broader picture of the experiences of other cities with promotion standards to bring context to developments in Philadelphia. To fill this need we commissioned David F. Labaree, Ph.D., from the University of Pennsylvania's School of Sociology, to present an historical chronicle of promotion policies nationally and locally and to conduct a review of relevant descriptive and evaluative material about newly instituted promotion policies in other big cities.

This Executive Summary is a product of those efforts. It reflects the main findings and concepts detailed in the larger report (47 pages) of the same title. To our knowledge the study is the most comprehensive analysis of historical and current promotion policies now available. We are proud to have produced it and hope you will be eager to read it and to consider its implications for raising academic performance in Philadelphia and elsewhere.

RICHARD H. DE LONE	NORMAN A NEWBERG	DEBRA S. WEINER
President CCPEP	Co-Chairperson CCPEP Promotion Standards Committee	Co-Chairperson CCPEP Promotion Standards Committee

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David F. Labaree

CHAPTER 1
MERIT PROMOTION, SOCIAL PROMOTION: THE PENDULUM SWINGS

In the last few years, standards for student promotion have become a major topic of discussion among those concerned about public education. The reason for this is that educators, parents and citizens in general have become worried about the large number of students unable to perform basic skills up to grade-level standard. Increasingly they are arguing that achievement can be raised by demanding that students demonstrate a minimum level of competence before they can be promoted to the next grade. Such a system of merit promotion is seen as fostering achievement while the system it is designed to replace, social promotion, is seen as discouraging achievement. Under social promotion, students are advanced in response to their social needs--particularly the need to remain with their own age group--more than to their proven ability.

American public education has been characterized over the years by slow swings of the pendulum between these two alternatives. At the start of common school systems in the United States (1836 in Philadelphia), merit promotion was the rule. In Philadelphia, students were required to pass written examinations in order to move from one grade of school to another. There was particularly intense competition over the admissions exam to the only two high schools, Central and Girls. Very few students attended these schools in the nineteenth century (they accounted for only 2% of all public school students), and this exclusiveness made them attractive prizes for ambitious high-achievers. Shaped like a pyramid (a wide base and narrow top), the Philadelphia school system offered powerful incentives to such students while weeding out the others along the way.

Consider some of the most important characteristics of this system of merit promotion. The system was strongly grounded in the principle that educational rewards should be granted only to those with academic merit. Under such a policy students were seen as having widely varying capacities for school work, and therefore schools tried to sort out the most able and urge them along. In addition this was an inflexible sort of schooling: the curriculum set the standard and students were expected to adapt to it or leave.

By the turn of the century, however, the shape of education was changing. As large numbers of students began attending high school, this level of schooling lost its exclusiveness, and the educational pyramid was gradually flattened into a form approaching a rectangle. In response to these changes and others, leading

educators began to argue strongly in favor of replacing the old system of merit promotion with what later became known as social promotion. They argued that schooling should be centered on the needs of the child rather than simply on the demands of the traditional academic curriculum. This meant turning attention away from the superior student in order to focus on the average student. Under the old merit standard of promotion, which was geared to the abilities of the high achievers, large numbers of students were forced to repeat: in 1919 it is reported that it took the average Philadelphia student 10 years to complete eight grades. This large-scale retention of students was seen as grossly inefficient, since school systems were paying for considerably more schooling than they would have to under conditions of 100% promotion.

According to the critics of merit promotion, these problems would all be resolved if school systems would begin scaling down their standards to fit the average student and begin promoting all but a very few members of each class. Such a system implied a different perception of the student than the one that had prevailed under merit promotion. Students were seen as being broadly capable of learning the same material at the same time, which meant that schools could teach them and promote them as a class, without worrying about the individual differences that were the focus of schools in the nineteenth century.

Social promotion gradually won out. In Philadelphia the elementary school promotion rate rose from about 80% at the turn of the century to 85% in the early 1920s, to more than 90% by the 1930s and finally reached a peak after the Second World War of 98%, staying near that level until the last decade. Recently, however, the promotion rate has begun to fall in the Philadelphia school system, dropping to 95% in 1978 and 93% in 1982. Social promotion has come under severe attack lately; and even in advance of a formal change in district policy, promotional practices are beginning to shift.

Critics of social promotion have made the following arguments against the practice: 1) Low standards for promotion symbolize a general lack of concern for achievement in the schools. 2) They give students the message that little achievement is expected of them. 3) To promote students whose performance is poor is to reward them for lack of accomplishment; instead they should be learning to work for their rewards. 4) The threat of retention is a powerful device for motivating students, parents and teachers to

raise achievement levels. 5) Promoting students by age rather than by achievement ignores the significant differences in ability and application which separate students. 6) Social promotion encourages schools to adapt to the needs of students when in fact schools should be setting standards for students to meet.

The attack on social promotion has developed into a broad-based movement for higher promotional standards. This movement favors the adoption of a package of four related educational reforms:

1) Back to Basics: stressing the core academic courses over electives and, within the core courses, stressing the acquisition of basic skills--especially reading.

2) Minimum Competency Testing: using achievement tests extensively to establish which students meet minimum standards of competency and which do not.

3) Retention: refusing to promote students whose achievement falls below the minimum standard.

4) Remedial Instruction: applying special instruction to retained students, usually in a special class, in order to allow them to pass the promotional standard.

In many ways this new system of merit promotion resembles the nineteenth century version. Its supporters sometimes talk about bringing standards back, and in a way they are right. The popularity of merit promotion policy today represents a swing of the pendulum away from social promotion's emphasis on organizational efficiency, child-centeredness and group capabilities back toward the older emphasis on academic merit, curriculum-centeredness and individual differences. But there are also important differences between the old and new forms of merit promotion. Originally the concern was with the high achieving student, but now it is with the low achieving student. The earlier system provided a strong positive motivation to students for achievement, the possibility of going to high school, but the modern merit system lacks such an inducement (since high school is no longer a privilege but an obligation for students); now it uses a form of negative motivation, the threat of retention.

The chart below summarizes the characteristics of all three forms of student promotion:

OLD MERIT PROMOTION	SOCIAL PROMOTION	NEW MERIT PROMOTION
Academic merit	Organizational efficiency	Academic merit
Individual selection	Group learning	Individual selection
Differential capability	Equal capability	Differential capability
Curriculum centeredness	Child centeredness	Curriculum centeredness
Focus on best student	Focus on average student	Focus on poorest student
Positive motivation to achieve	Lack of motivation to achieve	Negative motivation to achieve

CHAPTER 2
CITIES WITH MERIT PROMOTION POLICIES

A number of school systems have recently established programs with raised promotional standards. What follows is a brief summary of these programs in five such cities:

NEW YORK: New York has by far the most inflexible promotional standard, which requires that fourth and seventh graders score above a fixed point in the reading portion of the CATs in order to be promoted; no other factors are considered. At the same time it puts more effort and resources into remedial instruction for the retained students than do the other cities.

BALTIMORE: Within the target group, third to sixth grade, promotion is determined by a combination of scores on locally designed proficiency tests and classroom grades; marginal cases are considered individually by a special committee within the school.

WASHINGTON, D.C.: In grades one to six promotion goes to students who have achieved 70% mastery of the instructional objectives of reading and math for the appropriate grade level, as determined by teacher evaluation. Those who fail to meet this standard in both skill areas are retained while those who fail to achieve mastery of only one area are promoted into a special transitional class focused on the deficient skill.

CHICAGO: Designed around the city's Mastery Learning Program, promotional policy states that students in elementary grades should achieve minimum mastery of 80% of MLP reading units for their grade level, in the judgment of their teacher, if they are to win promotion. However, the promotional decision should take into account other factors as well, such as test scores and social, emotional and physical growth.

MILWAUKEE: In first to third grade, students who are not reading at a set primer level should be considered for retention, while in grades four to six, math and language arts capabilities should be considered in addition to reading. A wide range of other factors should be considered in a retention decision as well, but no single factor makes retention mandatory. Only one retention is permissible per grade and only two in the first six grades.

CHAPTER 3
THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MERIT PROMOTION IN SPURRING ACHIEVEMENT

There have been more than 50 studies measuring the effects of promotion and retention on student achievement levels and attitudes, but the results have been entirely inconclusive. Unfortunately, the large majority of these studies were designed in a way that biased the outcomes in favor of one policy or the other, and therefore the results of these studies are both predictable and meaningless. The few studies which have unbiased designs produce contradictory results. This absence of solid evidence on a subject that is so significant is quite surprising, and even more surprising is the apparent unwillingness of the school systems which have adopted merit promotion to conduct careful evaluations of its effectiveness. Only New York (of those studied) has produced such an evaluation so far, and its results were negative. Students retained and instructed under the new promotional policy made achievement gains no greater than those made by low achieving students before the policy was put into effect. The conclusion from these studies should give pause to anyone who strongly advocates a policy of raised promotion standards: there is no solid evidence to show that merit promotion is any more effective than social promotion in spurring student achievement.

The evidence fails to support the connection between merit promotion and student achievement which constitutes the primary reason for favoring the policy. However, neither is there any proof that such a connection does not exist, and there are some good theoretical reasons for thinking that merit promotion does in fact raise the level of achievement. Consider the following reasons, which are derived from the general characteristics of merit promotion, as discussed earlier:

1) Fear of Retention: The threat of holding back students is likely to motivate many of them to work at raising their achievement levels, and it may also motivate parents and teachers to be more supportive. But this effect brings with it several problems. First, if a student is sufficiently afraid of retention to try to work his or her way out of it, the same student might suffer problems of personal adjustment if actually subjected to retention; but efforts to make retention less frightening would undercut its power to motivate. Second, the average or superior student who is comfortably above the promotional minimum is not going to be motivated by the threat of retention. Third, if the reasons for underachievement are not lack of motivation

but factors such as class background, race discrimination and family conditions, then retention may be punitive rather than remedial.

2) Enhanced Remedial Instruction: Perhaps the main benefit of merit promotion for student achievement is the intensified instructional effort launched by school systems in order to raise the scores of retained students above the promotional standard. Politically it may be easier to gain funding for remedial education under the banner of promotional standards than in more traditional ways.

3) Focusing Attention on Achievement: Since social promotion tended to understate the importance of achievement, merit promotion may be a very useful slogan around which proponents of achievement could rally. As a symbol of commitment to achievement, promotional standards could be tied to a number of otherwise unrelated issues--such as making schools in general more effective.

4) Simulated Achievement and Teaching to the Test: If promotional standards are set in terms of standardized test scores, it is likely that there will be a concerted effort to coach students for the test, which leads to artificially inflated gains in achievement.

CHAPTER 4
RAISING PROMOTIONAL STANDARDS: SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

What follows are some suggestions about how a policy of raised promotional standards might be implemented--drawing on the experience of other school systems and reflecting the concerns expressed in this paper:

1) A Flexible Promotional Standard: At a bare minimum this means not relying on a single score of a single test, as New York does. In the interest of being less punitive and more suited to the needs of the individual student, the standard should be constructed from multiple measures (including tests and teacher's evaluation) and should leave room for appeal to higher authority. Examples of such policies are found in Milwaukee and Chicago.

2) A Valid Measure of Achievement: Since the process of learning for every student is located within a particular curriculum and a particular mode of instruction, the most valid measure of that student's achievement is the one which best reflects the special character of this learning process. The model for such validity is the individual informal questioning technique used by Milwaukee teachers to establish a student's reading level (although this validity is obtained at the expense of city-wide uniformity); the least valid measure is the most uniform, a nationally distributed standardized test. In between the two extremes is a city-designed achievement test geared to the curriculum in use.

3) A Rigorous Evaluation Program of Effectiveness: Raised promotional standards are usually put in place under conditions where much has been promised and much is expected. People inside and outside the system want to see achievement levels go up and quickly as a result of the new policy. The temptation is great to give people what they want by presenting only the rosiest data, by failing to employ statistical controls and even, perhaps, by inflating scores. One way around this problem is for the interested parties to agree in advance on a method of evaluation and on what findings will constitute success or failure. If the program simply does not work, there should be contingency plans for changing it or scrapping it.

4) More Than Just Basics: If grade schoolers have difficulty developing a basic competency in reading and math, then they should receive special help in these areas at the

expense of other subjects; likewise with high school students lacking functional literacy skills. However, I wish to argue that if we take these ideas about correcting learning deficiencies to the logical extreme, we will boil the entire curriculum down to its most basic level and in the process produce new kinds of deficiencies. One would be a deficiency of interest, since time in school would increasingly be spent on narrowly focused exercises and drills. Another would be a deficiency of breadth and complexity, while ideally schooling should be expansive and challenging.

5) Include the Average Student: While concentrating on raising the level of the low achieving student up to a minimum competency, we must not forget the achievement needs of the average student. Minimum competency testing can easily lead to a pass/fail mentality in which those who pass begin to coast, since they feel that no more is expected of them. If higher promotional standards are adopted, it would be as part of a much broader orientation toward high achievement for all students. Without this, a policy of raising standards for the poorest students can have the ironic effect of debasing standards for the rest of the class.

6) Emphasize Instruction Over Retention: As in all things related to schools, instruction should come first. Retention should be seen as a way of motivating students to learn and as a way of allocating instructional resources, but it should not become an end in itself. It is all too easy in the midst of establishing promotional standards to become lost in the complexities of testing, in the fine-tuning of regulations, and in the selling of the program and to forget about the special instructional needs one has created by means of these standards. Retention puts students on the slow track, and only instruction can get them out of it.

7) Effective Schools: Ultimately what matters most to student achievement is not one promotional policy or another but the overall effectiveness of the schools in carrying out their mission. Milwaukee's Project RISE (Rising to Individual Scholastic Excellence) is an example of a broad-based program which puts together many of the suggestions made here and does so in such a way that it

makes promotional policy peripheral rather than central. (The program was established before the introduction of the system's promotional policy and thus is independent of it.) Beginning with the firm belief that the school by itself can make a difference with the low income low achiever, RISE systematically emphasizes all of the factors which its organizers see as characteristic of a truly effective school: grade level achievement expectations for all students; an orderly learning climate; instructional leadership by the principal; basic skill orientation; frequent inservice training; the establishment of curriculum objectives; regular homework; student identification with the school; heterogeneous ability grouping; direct and structured instruction; concentration on time on task and a commitment to mastery learning.

CONCLUSION

In the absence of evidence clearly defining one form of promotional policy to be the most effective, the choice of merit promotion or social promotion (or more likely some combination of the two) must be made on the basis of social values. To adopt some form of such a policy is to define what kind of public school system we want to create. In their pure form, the two poles of promotional policy represent strikingly different conceptions of the learning capacities of students, the instructional focus of the school and the goals of education. Any policy that is implemented, whether it leans toward one pole or the other, will involve critical value choices whose consequences will be felt for a long time to come. We are still experiencing the effects of the last decision about promotional policy.

Citizens Committee on Public Education in Philadelphia is an independent non-profit group engaging in citizen action for excellence in public education. CCPEP, founded in 1880, is Philadelphia's oldest citizen group whose sole concern is the improvement of public education. CCPEP believes that public education is every citizen's responsibility, that it is important to every student, parent, citizen and to the economic health of the city itself. CCPEP monitors the activities of the school board, analyzes contracts, visits the classrooms, supports early childhood education, researches and recommends instructional policy, seeks to promote accountability and educational equity and provides resource information to the public.

An Abstract and Main Report (47 pages) are available.

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